

Francisco Sagasti on: 'The Emerging Fractured Global Order'



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[Photo: Soldier in Central America.]

The "Baconian" world view — including a belief in the inevitability of human progress — that has guided the actions of industrialized societies for almost four centuries is now drawing to a close. For those in the field of development cooperation, the ability to successfully navigate the uncharted waters of the new international order will require "structural adjustment of our minds," argues [Francisco Sagasti](#), President of FORO Nacional/Internacional in Lima, Peru and author of a work-in-progress entitled, "The Emerging Fractured Global Order," for the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

According to Sagasti, "one of the most important investments we can make today is in thinking, in reflection, in analysing who we are, and, with our limited resources, investing in changing people's mind sets."

"We are now in a major process of transformation," he stated during a recent seminar at IDRC. "The development cooperation experiment as we knew it has ended, the Cold War has ended, the golden age of economic prosperity is long gone. We are reaching the end of an era, which has lasted 350-400 years, what I call the Baconian Age."

Baconian program

It began in the 17th Century, when Sir Francis Bacon articulated and started implementing a radical new "program" that placed Man at the centre of the Universe. Bacon's program consisted of: a new way to generate knowledge (the scientific method); a new purpose (the application of knowledge to improve the human condition); and new institutions dedicated to knowledge creation.

"For 350 years, the West has been pursuing the Baconian program," said Sagasti. "This program has been so successful in its application that it has ended up destroying its foundations. The conception of Man as the centre of the Universe basically led to environmental destruction and has forced us to reconsider our linkages with Nature."

"The scientific method — in particular, reductionism — ended up producing some results that could not be explained by that methodology — everything from quantum physics to cosmology to chaos and systems theory," he continued. "[This] has led to a completely new set of intellectual tools, and an explosion of new ways of thinking over the past several decades."

Shattered illusions

Moreover, the Baconian belief in human progress has been challenged repeatedly. "This optimism peaked about the end of the last century, but 1914 shattered any illusions. The carnage of World War I left people totally bewildered," said Sagasti. "What happened after World War I — the Versailles Accord, Communism, Nazism, World War II, etc. — destroyed our innocence."

Towards the end of World War II, he argued, "there was a sense of renewed optimism. All of a sudden, it became fashionable to think about progress again." What emerged was the modern concept of development cooperation. "The implicit model of development was to adopt the American Way of Life and to do in one generation what the industrialized nations had done over five or six generations, without any of the social costs." But the launch of this experiment coincided with two other major events: the start of the Cold War and the dawn of a period of unparalleled prosperity.

The Cold War divided the world into two distinct camps with similar aims but different methods — e.g. single party and central planning versus democracy and market economies, said Sagasti. Meanwhile, the global economy was booming. "From 1950 to 1973, world per capita GDP grew by 2.9% per year, more than three times as fast as it did between 1913 and 1950. In all regions, GDP per capita grew faster than in any other period of human history. Africa was growing at 4.4% per year," he noted.

Unparalleled prosperity

"This was a time of unparalleled prosperity, so countries could afford to be generous. What you saw was a tremendous expansion of development cooperation and development institutions, without precedent — not only the amount of money but the number of UN agencies and institutions and bilateral agencies," said Sagasti.

Since the 1970's, however, the experiment has suffered a series of setbacks, culminating in the fiscal downsizing of the current decade. As a result, "this period of expansion of institutions, of working the ways we were accustomed to work, is no longer with us. Development cooperation as we knew it and the institutions as we knew them can no longer and will no longer continue."

"I am not arguing whether the development cooperation experiment was successful or not, what I am arguing is that it has ended," Sagasti stressed. "You can no longer keep having the same institutional structures, the same set of programs and, more important, the same mind sets. It is a different world today than it was 25 years ago."

International stability

For example, the stability of the international system meant something very different in 1951 than it does now, he argued. "Four decades ago, it involved the balance of power between East and West. Today, stability is concerned with questions like what to do with South Korea when its economy starts to melt down."

According to Sagasti, "we need new institutional arrangements that can adapt to a more complex, fluid, fragmented context, in which there are many more actors than just the two superpowers."

"We have new actors coming on the scene, but there is no play. Nobody has written the script as yet. One of the urgent tasks over the next few years will be to try to think up a new script, including how to provide some graceful exit lines for a few of the [older] actors," he concluded.

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